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ABSTRACT

Two concepts have been confused: equality of opportunity and equality of ability, which has led us to link intellectual giftedness with elitism. This linkage undercuts the ability to nurture and benefit from the gifts of the gifted, an important issue in rural places experiencing either withering economies and loss of population or an influx of immigrants. To deny academically gifted students the support they need to thrive because that gift is thought to be present only in elite or economically advantaged groups is profoundly discriminatory and classist. Relegating intellectualism to the realm of the elite can also result in an inferior education for children who are not considered gifted. Rural children are given the message that their community is wonderful, but they had better get out as soon as possible. Those who remain receive the message that they are not as able as those who left. In this time of upheaval, rural America needs its gifted students to bring their intellects, education, and energy to bear fruit in home orchards. Rural communities and schools must invest in education of the gifted to break the cycle of out-migration that now drains away many of the most academically able students, and deters others from seeking postsecondary education. Rural schools and communities must become mutually self-sustaining to survive, and to do so they must nurture and use a vital resource: intellectually gifted students. These points are illustrated through vignettes about coastal Maine. (Contains 21 references.) (Author/TD)

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Diversities of Gifts:

The Role of Giftedness in the Sustainability Of Rural Schools and Rural Communities

Now there are diversities of gifts, but the same spirit.

I Corinthians Ch. 12, v. 4

Barbara Kent Lawrence, Ed.D.

An invited paper presented for the Belin-Blank International Center for Gifted Education and Talent Development at the Wallace Family National Conference on Gifted Education in Rural Schools, May 22, 1999 at the University of Iowa, Iowa City.

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ABSTRACT:

We have confused two concepts: equality of opportunity and equality of ability, which has led us to link intellectual giftedness with elitism. This linkage undercuts our ability to nurture and benefit from the gifts of the gifted, an important issue in rural places whether they are experiencing withering economies and loss of population or an influx of immigrants. In this time of upheaval, rural America needs its gifted students to bring their intellects, education, and energy to bear fruit in home orchards. I suggest that rural communities and schools must invest in education of the gifted to break the cycle of out-migration that now drains away many of the most academically able students, and deters others from seeking post-secondary education. I argue that rural schools and communities must become mutually self-sustaining to survive, and that in order to do so they must nurture and use a vital resource: intellectually gifted students.

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Diversities of Gifts:
The Role of Giftedness in the Sustainability
of Rural Schools and Rural Communities

I am very pleased to be here today with you and I thank you for joining me. When I was considering all the things I wanted to think with you about today, I knew I was going to be with an erudite group – so I worked hard to find a suitably arcane text with an appropriate metaphor. And I came up with two - the first is from that important book about the academically gifted – Swimmy, by Leo Leoni.

Swimmy – as you may remember, is an intellectually gifted young fish. Living with his classmates in a school (no accidental image this) he and they are subject to the predatory nature of the larger society in which they struggle to survive. The Big Fish threaten Swimmy and his community of friends and extended family. None of the Little Fish think there is anything they can do to protect themselves but Swimmy uses his gift – his creative brain - and organizes the school into one great big fish that can scare off predators.

Which leads me to my second text: "Now there are diversities of gifts, but the same spirit," (I Corinthians Ch. 12, v. 4). We are all gifted in different ways, and we need the talents of all of our children to create a compassionate, well-organized, creative, humane and sustainable society. Perhaps the model for Swimmy's World, and for other rural communities, should be multiply colored and patterned fish swimming both apart and together in various forms and shapes for different purposes, and for mutual support and benefit.

Let us think about our own society and the ways in which we spurn the gifts of the gifted. Too often we forget that the founding fathers intended the phrase "all men are created equal," to mean equal in opportunity and rights, not in intellectual or other gifts and talents. One does not have to be gifted to merit equal access and equal treatment. Depending on one's beliefs, we are all equal in the sight of God and within the purview of the constitution and our laws. To merge these two important and separate ideas works against everyone in the society.

Furthermore, as Aimee Howley has pointed out, "the ruling elite are probably no more likely to be gifted than are children from the middle classes," (Howley, 1986:118). And as Biemuller suggested, "while some observed diversity is clearly the product of environmental disadvantage, much diversity is also observed in environmentally advantaged populations," (Biemuller, 1993:7). Ability in all fields is found throughout the population. To deny academically gifted students the support they need to thrive because that gift is thought to be present only in elite or economically advantaged groups is itself profoundly discriminatory and classist.

By confusing equality of opportunity with equality in intellectual ability we also discriminate against those we consider less gifted in a pernicious and unintended way. Meredith Burke, writing in the Boston Globe, stated:

> For at least half a century, we as a nation have continually rejected research findings about the gifted because reality refuses to be politically correct. Americans persist in applying the political concept "all men are created equal" to the intellectual realm, with

> painful and costly results. Even more perversely, we loosen this straitjacket for those who fall below the mean while tightening it for those who land above.
>
> Burke, 1992.

As Burke suggests, relegating intellectualism to the realm of the elite can result in an inferior education for children who are not considered gifted. Powell suggests that, "American educators quickly built a system around the assumption that most students didn't have what it took to be serious about the great issues of human life, and that even if they had the wit, they had neither the will nor the futures that would support heavy-duty study," (Powell, 1985:245). This approach provided second-rate education to immigrant children, created generations of adults who did not fully develop their own potential and who felt threatened by using their minds. Frankly, it reminds me of the "self-esteem" movement that rewarded children regardless of their achievement just to make them feel good. The problem is that children are too savvy for this approach and know it is a sham.

We have only to compare the goals of a prestigious private school and a public high school in Maine to see the difference between education for the gifted "elite" and students who are not expected to be academically gifted. Head Master William Polk of Groton School, discussing the curriculum said it emphasizes the "need to develop certain skills: thinking imaginatively, speaking and writing clearly, and reasoning quantitatively," (Polk, 1994:3). In contrast, a year-long course required for freshman at Mount Desert Island High School was described as "designed to equip them with basic life skills such as computer

literacy, insuring a car, balancing a checkbook, and weight control" (The Bar Harbor Times, 1994).

I agree with Biemuller when he points out that:

> Practices that ignore the reality of developmental diversity in achievement may actually *amplify* the impact naturally occurring educational diversity...educational programs that acknowledge diversity provide the best hope for minimizing its impact on skill acquisition.
>
> Biemuller, 1993:7

Part of our problem acknowledging the gifted is that we see them as privileged and, therefore, undeserving of attention, which we may feel incapable of giving. We rationalize that the ability of the intellectually gifted assures their success in life without anyone's help, and our greater comfort in aiding those we perceive to be needy focuses our efforts on under-achievers.

Hallahan even suggests, gifted children tend to be superior in every way – in intelligence, in physique, in social attractiveness, in achievement. (Hallahan,1991: 412). I don't know if more current research confirms this thought, but it underscores the reason American are uneasy about allocating resources to students they think are already so advantaged.

I know in this audience there are many stories about times we have ourselves experienced discrimination because we were bright, or witnessed our children's or students' suffering. Perhaps the most searing memory I carry from my own adolescence is of something trivial that happened at a school dance we were required to attend. I was "cut out on" by the boy I was dancing with. My new partner and I danced awkwardly for about 45 seconds and then he dropped

his hands, stood back from me said, "I can't dance with you anymore, you are too smart." I can still remember my confusion and pain. I will never know what I said in such a short time to make him abandon me in the middle of the dance floor, but he hurt me and as a socially insecure and gawky adolescent I could have used some help from a caring adult in understanding what had happened. Just because we are bright does not mean we are emotionally whole or impervious to pain.

Let us go back for a moment to Swimmy and tie the experience of his school of little fish to a situation I have observed since 1948 in coastal Maine in order to think about why rural communities need the gifts of the gifted. We do so at the risk of labeling intellectually able students a "resource," as the Howleys have cautioned us not to do. But I can't get around the fact that able minds are a resource, wherever they are put to use. However, the other reason bright rural students should be encouraged to develop their talents and invest themselves in their rural communities is that doing so will be good for them – will reduce the tension they feel and their own sense of cognitive dissonance. Let me explain by giving an example.

Maine students are first in the nation on tests of reading and math when they are in 4th grade, as demonstrated by their performance on the NAEP's. Yet they go on to higher education at a rate that puts them 49th in the nation if we look just at publicly funded instate institutions, or 44th in the nation if we include all colleges and universities. What explains this huge gap? I think it is a

profoundly complex question, but that part of the answer lies in anti-intellectualism that equates intellectually demanding education with elitism refuses to promote or adequately fund both academically challenging K-12 schooling and post-secondary education. Unfortunately, by confusing political equality and equality in opportunity with equality in ability we have created a climate of anti-intellectualism and fear of elitism that has undercut our ability to benefit fully from the gifts of the academically gifted.

In practical terms, why does any of this matter? I believe it matters because in many rural places there is a pattern of out-migration and under-education of those who remain that is contributing to their demise. There are too many symptoms of this illness; let me just cite a few. The long-tradition of out-migration to find jobs exerts tremendous pressure on rural students to leave their communities. In Maine, for example, and in many other rural communities, children learn from their culture that there are few local opportunities for educated people and that if they expect to find professional jobs, "to amount to anything," they must leave home.

Those who stay home feel second-rate. Whether they stay because they love their families and communities, and they love the way of life, and the place, many still feel they have to apologize for their lack of ambition and initiative. As one man I interviewed, who is a fifth generation resident of Mount Desert Island, said,"

> Look at the natives as opposed to those 'from away.' If you live here your whole life by definition you lack some degree of courage. I think at the risk of making it too simple, after working 22 years in this school, that there is an attitude of victimization. In this town the

> people who live in this town, who lived here for a long time; lots of them feel like victims. It is a self-fulfilling prophecy. I mean if the cream goes away, what does that mean about those of us who stay?

Too many students I have spoken with respond to the question, "Where do you think Maine 4th graders rank on national tests of math and reading," by answering, "49th, 50th."

In response to my question about this phenomenon I observed in coastal Maine of de-valuing one's self and community, Dr. Robert Levine of the Harvard Graduate School of Education replied, "

> In the Third World, many parents have very unrealistic ideas. They actually think their kids are doing a lot better than they are because their horizons are so limited. They have very high aspirations [because] they don't understand where they are located. Here in Maine is the reverse situation where they actually are doing very well by national standards and yet they see themselves at the bottom of the heap. That is almost unique.
>
> Dr. Robert A. Levine: 1999

I have a feeling that this pattern of self-deprecation extends into many rural communities, perhaps particularly those in which there is in-migration of more affluent and better educated urban people seeking a bucolic setting in which to vacation and or retire.

In his writings on dependency theory, Andre Gunder Frank suggested that people living farthest from the central cities benefit from the distance and their relative isolation by avoiding dependency and internalizing feelings of inferiority to those they perceive as more sophisticated, knowledgeable, and yes, intelligent. Frank further suggested that dependency on the urban center

creates a habit of thinking about oneself that undermines initiative and confidence. In coastal Maine on Mount Desert Island, home of Acadia National Park, on which the year-round population of just over 12,000 residents mushrooms to between 2.5 and 3 million during "the season," I observed such a pattern. Local people are ceding responsibility for running local institutions like school boards. In 1960 all the people serving on school boards on the island, were local residents, in 1993, 80% of school board members were "from away."

Part of what happened during the thirty years between 1960 and 1990 was the in-migration of urbanized "people from away," who came, with their more advanced education and greater wealth, to enjoy the culture and environment of the island. In 1989 67% of the people of Maine who had graduate degrees had moved to Maine from out-of-state. These highly educated people saw Maine as a land of opportunity – I was one of them - ironically as educated Maine people continued leaving the state to find "suitable" work.

Maine Labor Force

	1979 Distribution		1989 Distribution	
	Born		Born	
	Maine	Elsewhere	Maine	Elsewhere
High Status Jobs	60%	40%	53%	47%
Total Labor Force	73%	27%	67%	33%
Under or Over Representation	-13%	13%		
Workers with Graduate Training	39%	61%	33%	67%
Total labor Force	73%	27%	67%	33%
Over or Under Representation	-34%	+34%	-34%	+34%
Workers: Training After High School	63%	37%	57%	43%
Total Labor Force	73%	27%	67%	33%
Under or Over Representation	-10%	10%	10%	10%

Richard Sherwood, private correspondence

People "from away" moved in and took over, usually without realizing the implication of what they were doing, and certainly without much opposition because in some ways we were seen as saviors of the economy and a backward society, even by the local people themselves. Our advanced degrees allowed us to work in relatively highly paid jobs, our sense of self-worth and confidence in our abilities allowed us to start businesses. Symptomatic of this is the fact that Maine people with the same credentials and experience are, on average, paid less for work in the same job than their competitors "from away."

How does this relate to "Swimmy?" and sustainable rural schools and communities? Swimmy had a choice. Swimmy could have swum away to Atlantis and become an entrepreneur. Instead, Swimmy stayed home and used his gifts to help the other fish in his community and together they created a way to deal with the Big Fish. Consider the alternative. What would have happened to his community if Swimmy had left? Other Little Fish might have been as resourceful, but it is also possible the school might have been swallowed up. Now consider what we do to a small rural community when we say escape is the only option for kids we consider bright enough to go to college. Consider the message we unintentionally give so many rural children throughout their lives – this is a wonderful community but you had better get out as soon as you can. What a terrible contradiction, or in the words of the social scientist, "cognitive dissonance," we create both within and between people in rural communities.

For those who remain in the community, not only does the culture suggest they are not as able as those who have left, it also teaches that are, "If you stay here you don't need any more education because you won't have any opportunity to use it." By linking the need for higher education to getting a job we discourage kids from furthering their education when the local culture is depressed economically and there don't seem to be any jobs open for educated graduates. Swimmy might swim off to college and later open a high-tech business but his classmates who stay home don't go to college and don't learn the skills they need to create businesses or qualify for professional jobs or fully develop the gifts their community needs to survive. And as we see in rural communities that attract in-migration, local residents are being priced out of their homes.

Elizabeth Kline, writing for the Ford Foundation, developed a framework for thinking about sustainability of communities that I have applied to rural schools and their communities. Kline states that a sustainable community must exhibit four conditions: economic security, ecological integrity, quality of life, and personal empowerment. Kline tells us that economic security must be based on an economy that includes a:

> variety of businesses, industries, and institutions which are environmentally sound (in all aspects), financially viable, provide training, education and other forms of assistance to adjust to future needs, provide jobs and spend money with the community, and enable employees to have a voice in decisions which affect them. A more sustainable community also is one in which resident's money remains in the community.

"Ecological integrity," or "harmony with natural systems allows a

community to be more easily sustainable by reducing consumption of resources. Kline describes "quality of life" as present in:

> a community that: recognizes and supports peoples' evolving sense of well-being which includes sense of belonging, a sense of place, a sense of self-worth, a sense of safety, and a sense of connection with nature, and provides goods and services which meet peoples needs both as they define them can as can be accommodated within the ecological integrity of natural systems.

And finally, a sustainable community:

> enables people to feel empowered and take responsibility based on a shared vision, equal opportunity, ability to access expertise and knowledge for their own needs, and a capacity to affect the outcome of decisions that affect the.

Kline, January, 1995: 4-5.

In order to create such communities, rural America must fully develop the gifts and talents of all its children by investing in their education. It is critically important that we invest in the education of the gifted and nurture their gifts so that these students return home and invest themselves in their communities. I think it is vital that schools and their communities think about ways in which they can be mutually sustaining.

Last year I interviewed an experienced educator in Ireland because I was interested in ways Ireland has invested in education and ways in which this investment has contributed to the extraordinary success of the Irish economy. "Barbara," she said, "do you realize that there are women in the bogs of western Ireland doing the books for plastic surgeons in New York City?" "No, Dymphna, I

had no idea," I answered, thinking as I did that if the women of the poorest area of Ireland, depressed for centuries by famine and out-migration, and domination by a foreign power could achieve a renaissance, so could we. I thought, "If it works in Ireland, why can't it work for the people of West Virginia and Maine and for all the other places in rural America where people feel the best they can do for their children is to send them away from a dying community?

I believe we must and we can reverse this message. We can and we must celebrate the blessings of extended family, close communities, love of place and of a place, of society on a scale that is still human and humane. I believe we can and we must fully nurture the gifts of all our children, and give them the confidence to believe in themselves and in the value of their culture and history. In this age of communication that transcends geography there is no reason we can't re-vitalize the economy of rural America, and we need the diverse gifts of all our children to do so. We can only create sustainable, energetic communities and economies in rural America by nurturing the diverse gifts of all our children, by appreciating the importance of the gifts of the gifted.

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